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ABSTRACT

As P. L. Berger and T. Luckmann argue, what the public regards as social reality is a construction to which each member contributes by selecting from all available information to develop a picture of the world. To do so, people negotiate with other people regarding the meaning of the information provided. A logical extension of this theory is that public relations influences the meaning of reality. In organizations that deal with the public, complex social relationships, power, politics, and influence all effect the way problems are defined and small portions of reality constructed in order to make decisions and pursue solutions. Public relations practitioners construct the meaning of the environment for organizations (for example, by describing the consequences of their interaction with the public or the land), and represent the organizations to the outside world (for example, through media advertising), presenting constructions of reality to both sides which are then negotiated for. From this standpoint, criticisms of public relations practitioners' subjective definition of truth and their manipulation of facts are undercut by the recognition that all reality is socially constructed. Conversely, the practice of upsetting ordinary reality constructions and representing information in ways calculated to effect reality perception and behavior raises ethical questions. Individuals in public relations must be adequately prepared for issues of what constitutes honesty in communication when social reality is a construction arrived at through negotiation. (JG)

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PUBLIC RELATIONS IN THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY: THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS OF BERGER AND LUCKMANN'S VIEW OF THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY

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ABSTRACT

PUBLIC RELATIONS IN THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY: THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS OF BERGER AND LUCKMANN'S VIEW OF THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY

This paper argues, with social philosophers Berger and Luckmann, that "reality" is socially constructed and that views of what we regard as social reality are arrived at partly through negotiation with other people. If these notions are accepted, then public relations practice has a role to play in negotiation of the meaning of reality, beyond that of simple information provision. Public relations' role in the social construction of reality, which has theoretical, ethical and practical implications, is explored.

PUBLIC RELATIONS IN THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY: THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS OF BERGER AND LUCKMANN'S VIEW OF THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY

What we take for granted as social "reality" is a construction to which we contribute (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). Individually, we make some selection of all available information to develop for ourselves a picture of the world in which we live. Available information comes to us from a number of sources: the organisations of which we are a part, the media and groups, families, circles of friends, interest groups, to which we belong or with which we have some contact. Information is made available to us by and through organisations, or by and through our other social contacts. In order to construct our view of the world, we enter into a debate, or negotiation, in which we play a more or less active part with our information sources. Where we are less active, or even passive, our part in the negotiation is minimal and we may passively accept what is offered to us. Where we play a more active role, we may disagree with, or negotiate with our information sources regarding the meaning of the information they are providing to us. The argument of this paper is that public relations contributes to the social construction of reality by putting forward information for negotiation regarding its meaning and by contributing to the process of negotiation itself. Its contribution is made within the organisation on whose behalf it is practised, and to the wider society in which it is practised.

Consider these two advertisements which follow as illustrations 1 and 2.

Eurotunnel. Look at it this way.

Never mind Collier's Wood to Camden Town.

Forget Arnos Grove to Archway.

In six years' time, you'll be able to hop on a train from Birmingham to Brussels. Or catch the 8.23 from Newcastle to Nice (change at Paris).

For as the final section of rail is lowered into place somewhere beneath the Channel, Eurotunnel won't simply be making history.

It'll also create the single biggest unified rail network in the world.

Imagine all the advantages that'll mean to the hard-pressed international traveller.

For the first time ever, you'll find yourself getting from A to B without having to worry about sea.

There'll be no more humping luggage off the train onto the boat and back onto the train again.

No more pacing the deck worrying about missed connections.

And, just for good measure, rail journey times to the Continent reduced by about 2 hours.

Indeed, if you happen to be reading this in the cab queue at Heathrow, consider the following.

From city centre to city centre, the train will actually outstrip the plane on most trips up to 300 miles.

Beat that for going, Boeing.

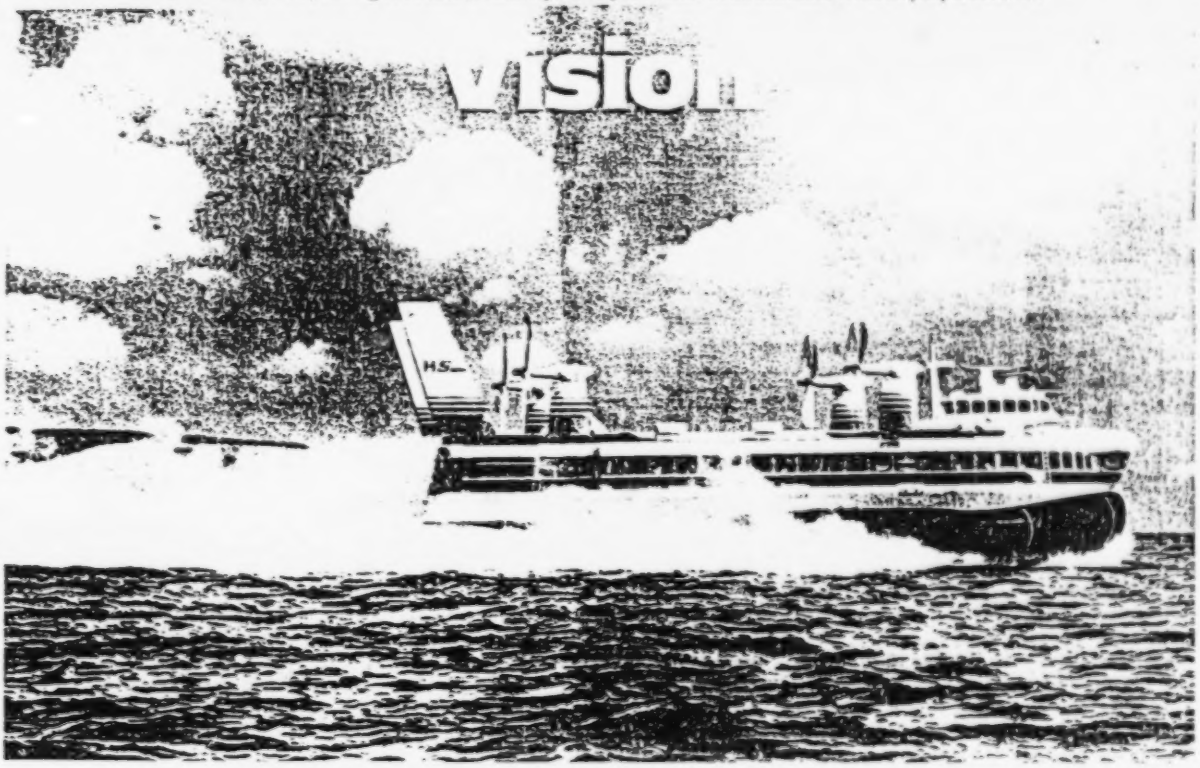
EURO TUNNEL

A breakthrough for Britain.

Illustration 1

Tunnel

If you wait 6 years you might be able to tunnel your way to France in 35 minutes. What do people see in it?



Alternatively you can take the Flyover today in just 35 minutes. And enjoy the view.

HOVERSPEED
Light years ahead of the tunnel.

WE OPERATE UP TO 27 FLIGHTS A DAY FOR CAR AND PASSENGER RESERVATIONS WITH GUARANTEED SEATS SEE YOUR TRAVEL AGENT OR PHONE 01 554 7061 OR (0304) 240241. FOR BROCHURES PHONE (0304) 240202 OR WRITE TO HOVERSPEED LTD FREEPOST DOVER CT17 9BR

Illustration 2 6

Both of these advertisements invite the reader of the newspapers in which they appeared to re-examine the "facts" about the proposed tunnel under the English Channel which, when completed in the mid 1990s, will provide a direct link between Britain and the continent of Europe.

The first advertisement asks the reader to consider the tunnel as a means of completing a large European rail network, that will allow a passenger to travel on the network from, say, Newcastle in the north of England to Nice in the south of France. The advertisement is direct in its instructions. It was placed by the Eurotunnel consortium which is to build the tunnel and asks the reader to look at the tunnel in a very specific way ("Look at it this way") as a key link in an expanded rail system.

The second advertisement is also direct. Placed by ferry companies with an obvious interest in present ferry services across the Channel, the advertisement stresses the advantages of ferry travel, and the claustrophobic experience travel through the tunnel may turn out to be.

Besides these advertisements, which describe aspects of the reality of the Channel tunnel, there are other views of the tunnel. To British exporters of manufactured goods and agricultural products, the tunnel is a cost-saving project, which will reduce time and costs involved in shipping goods to the continent. To inhabitants of Kent, around the tunnel's proposed construction site in the south of England, the tunnel is seen as a major source of new economic activity or, alternatively, as a project likely to have a large-scale and detrimental effect on the environment. Nationally, there are some who fear that the limited protection offered by the English Channel in Britain's defence will be lost if the tunnel is finally constructed. Others are afraid that Britain's national character will be lost if the country is finally linked physically to the continent. Others,

still, believe that this would be one of the major advantages of the building of the tunnel.

The point here is that the same set of "objective" facts - that, in the near future, a tunnel will be built under the Channel - are interpreted to mean entirely different things to different groups of people. What the tunnel will come to mean will depend on the interplay of the meanings attached to the same set of objective facts, the force and resources with which these meanings are presented and the public debate, through the institutions of government and the mass media, which will take place regarding the building and completion of the tunnel.

Before leaving the tunnel example, it's worth noting that the director of the public relations consultancy recently appointed to present the tunnel to the British public is quoted (PR Week, 18-24 June 1987) as saying that "our task will be to present Eurotunnel as a reality and not just a pipe dream. We will be working closely with the other agencies involved to this end" (emphasis added).

The tunnel example illustrates initial steps in a process which has been referred to as the social construction of reality, discussed in a treatise on the sociology of knowledge by Berger and Luckmann (1966). They argue that:

> "In so far as all human "knowledge" is developed, transmitted and maintained in social situations, the sociology of knowledge must seek to understand the process by which this is done in such a way that a taken-for-granted "reality" congeals for the man in the street."

They contend that the sociology of knowledge is concerned with the analysis of the construction of reality. "Knowledge" about "reality" emerges from a dialectic between objective facts and the subjective interpretation of them.

It is the intention in this paper to examine implications of the view that "reality" is socially constructed for public relations. In particular, the paper will look at the part played by public relations in the process of the development, transmission and maintenance of human knowledge in social situations. It will argue that meanings in society are arrived at through more or less conscious negotiations carried on with greater or lesser amounts of forcefulness or resources by proponents of particular points of view, among them public relations practitioners.

Objective facts contribute to the interpretations individuals and organisations develop of the world which they inhabit. Piaget (1972, 1977) shows how the individual's intellectual development depends on the interpretation of actions taken in relation to the real world. Perceptions of the world and of the consequences of actions taken to deal with the world are internalised and interpreted to form the basis of intellectual development. Piaget, writing of the genetic origins of knowledge, emphasises that what we work with, as we develop intellectually, are constructions or interpretations of the real world. These are contributed to by our own perceptual, cognitive and interpretative abilities as well as by the objective facts of the real world.

On an organisational level, a similar process is at work. Problem sensing by organisations is described by Kiesler and Sproull (1982, page 548) as "the cognitive process of noticing and constructing meaning about environmental change so that organisations can take action" (emphasis added). Weick (1969) has suggested that organisations, in a process similar to that described for the individual who has to make

sense of the real world, enact their own environments. That is, they arrive at interpretations of the world in which they operate, by acting in relation to the world and observing (in a selective fashion) the consequences of their actions. In Weick's view, an organisation and its members mark off information received as they interact with the organisation's environment. This information is interpreted and stored as a representation of the environment. This representation or construction of reality is used as a basis for decision-making and as a guide to action.

It is also carried in to future action taken in relation to the environment and towards other organisations, groups and individuals making up that environment. Talking in terms of face-to-face interaction, Berger and Luckmann (1966, page 45) describe how individuals use "typificatory schemes" in terms of which others are apprehended and dealt with in face-to-face encounters. An example of how typificatory schemes apply is provided by the resident of a large city who is asked for directions by a stranger. If the resident typifies the stranger as a "tourist" and a "welcome visitor" to the city, then his or her behaviour towards that person will be friendly and helpful. Where two people interact, two typificatory schemes enter into an ongoing "negotiation" in the face-to-face situation.

Weick (1969) has suggested that organisations perceive, interpret and respond to their environments in a manner comparable to that in which an individual acts in relation to his or her environment. Like individuals, organisations enter into relations with other organisations, groups and individuals armed with typificatory schemes, representations or constructions of reality.

The process by which organisations negotiate meanings within themselves, or with groups, individuals or organisations outside themselves can be illustrated with examples

from public relations practice. Public relations consultants, working with client organisations, may enter into negotiations with decision-making groups within those organisations regarding the precise problems faced by the organisation. Problem definition takes place in what has been described as "a complicated drama which involves power, influence, negotiation, game playing, organisational politics, complex social relationships with real people not merely office holders" (Eden and Sims, 1979). White (1986) and Phillips (1984) show how problems are defined, or small portions of reality ("small worlds" in Savage's terms (Savage, 1954)), are constructed in order for decisions to be made and solutions to be pursued. White (1986) shows in particular how important the role of boundary spanning individuals such as public relations practitioners is in constructing the meaning of the environment for organisations (see also Goldhaber, Dennis, Richetto and Wiio, 1979). Public relations practitioners also represent the organisations for which they act to the outside world. They are involved in the presentation of constructions of reality to the organisations themselves and to other organisations, groups and individuals outside the organisation. These constructions of reality are then negotiated for within the organisation, with decision-making groups for example or outside the organisation with publics important to the organisation.

Regarding public relations as inextricably bound up in the processes of the social construction of reality and the negotiation of meaning in organisations and society has important theoretical, ethical and practical implications. Theoretically, the study of public relations can be pursued in studies of the sociology of knowledge and social philosophy. The criticisms of public relations expressed by, for example, Olasky (1985) are undercut by the recognition that reality is socially constructed and that public relations in playing a part in reality-construction is doing nothing more than we all, as individuals, do more or less consciously. Olasky's criticism of public relations focuses on the extent to which practitioners rely on a subjectivist definition of truth, and on how

practitioners regard facts as malleable, to be shaped according to their own and corporate purposes. We all use this approach to the 'truth' as we go about our daily lives, according to the arguments put forward by Berger and Luckmann.

Where Olasky's criticism has more force is in the area of ethics. If public relations practitioners are involved in reality-construction, then the criteria and motivations guiding the selection and presentation of information of information become important from an ethical stand point: how is information chosen, and for what reasons? For example, is information chosen for its impact and because it will obscure other, less obvious, but important facts, and is it therefore chosen because the person or organisation using it is motivated to mislead?

Practically, public relations practitioners need to be prepared for the issues practice will lead them directly into, such as the issue of what constitutes honesty in communication when social reality is a construction arrived at through negotiation. Can individuals entering public relations be adequately prepared for the ethical dilemmas which arise in a practice which:

1) breaks away from the taken-for-granted reality in which ordinary members of society conduct their lives in a subjectively meaningful way

2) uses that freedom to select and represent information in ways calculated to have effects on the way ordinary members of the public, or members of special publics, view the world and behave in relation to it?

This paper has provided examples of how the same set of objective facts can be used to support a number of views of the world, or constructions of reality. It is suggested,

following lines of argument put forward by Berger and Luckmann, that reality is socially constructed. Individuals and organisations select from available information to arrive at their views of the world. These are negotiated in social settings, between individuals and between organisations. Social reality, to use Berger and Luckmann's term, congeals from this process of negotiation. Public relations plays a role in presenting and negotiating constructions of reality in organisational and wider social settings. The paper has argued that this view has important theoretical, ethical and practical implications. These are as yet relatively unexplored but, if expanded, they might have the effect Olasky argues for, that of reconstructing current public relations practice.

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